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Closing of the Holy Door of the
Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception
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On February 3rd 1943 a U boat torpedoed the USAT Dorchester, an Army troop ship in the Atlantic and she began to sink. There were not enough life jackets on board for all of the troops and so the four chaplains: A rabbi, Father Washington, and two Protestant ministers, stripped off their life jackets and gave them to four soldiers. As the survivors looked back on the sinking ship, they saw the four chaplains standing together with arms linked on the deck, each one praying according to his tradition. They were, as always, life-giving for those they served.

The survivors were waiting to be rescued and the four chaplains for their definitive encounter with the Lord. Waiting is one of the watchwords of the liturgical season of Advent, which we begin today. The Word of God advises today to stay awake, to be vigilant for the Lord's coming and look for the Lord and to use our talents and profit from the graces offered.

In the first reading the Chosen People are filled with pain and sorrow for their sins. They have experienced the terrible consequences of their infidelity: exile, profanation of temple. Does anyone examine his or her responsibility for difficult situations in our time? Can Isaiah gain a hearing in our midst?

Yet the power that motivates the Chosen People is the Word of God, so often forgotten, but still capable of moving hearts, calling forth aspirations, and inspiring the courage to accomplish difficult tasks. It is what we hear today. It can be our companion during these short weeks of spiritual preparation for our celebration of the Lord's coming in our midst.

We can be vigilant by spending some time reading and contemplating that Word as it leads us through the next three weeks. In fact, Jesus tells us in the Gospel to be vigilant at all times, because we know not the day or the hour. It is a clarion call to recognize

Almighty God as the Master of our lives and to try and conform to His plan. It is not an attitude of fear, as Pope Francis reminded us today in the Angelus message, because His return is a moment of joy.

He added: "So, in a special way during these weeks, let us prepare the house of the heart with care, so that it is orderly and hospitable. In fact, keeping watch means keeping the heart ready."¹

Pope Benedict XVI encouraged us in the same vein in 2008: "...we all say that we do not have enough time, because the pace of daily life has become frenetic for everyone. In this regard too, the Church has "good news" to bring: God gives us *His* time. We always have little time; especially for the Lord, we do not know how or, sometimes, we do not want to find it. Well, *God has time for us!*"²

The invitation is to prepare for the Lord's coming—really His three comings. Quite naturally we are all aware of our preparation for Christmas, the anniversary of the birth in time of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. That is our immediate focus as we light the Advent wreath and as we accomplish all of the tasks associated with this holy season.

However, the beginning of Advent has a strong notion of the Second Coming whose day or hour is unknown. The parable in today's Gospel insists on being constantly prepared. The twelve hour schema that Mark presents calls to mind the Passion of Christ, when Jesus will say clearly that the hour has come. There can be no doubt that we must be ever vigilant.³

Finally, there is that personal encounter at the end of our pilgrimage that cannot be forgotten. The notion that we must be ever prepared to meet the Lord when He summons us into His presence is not absent from these days. That thought is not meant to be frightening, but it is a call to open-eyed preparation every day of the journey that is ours.

Indeed we also gather in this magnificent basilica to begin our long-range preparation for another time of grace, the Holy Year of 2025. Let me assure you that these extraordinary times of grace offer us unique opportunities. I witnessed the opening of the Holy Door in 1974, 1982 (extraordinary Jubilee for the 1,950th anniversary of the Redemption), and in 1999 and the closings in 1975, and 2001. I was no longer in the Eternal City for the Jubilee of Mercy, but each Jubilee Year has been a clear call to experience the power of God and to profit from the divine grace held out to us. The up-coming Jubilee will be no exception.

"We might say" with the late Pope Benedict XVI "that Advent is the season in which Christians must rekindle in their hearts the hope that they will be able with God's help to renew the world." ⁴ Is that not our prayer for the up-coming Jubilee? The theme "Pilgrims of Hope" clearly points out that we are not pessimistic travelers on the journey to the

¹ Pope Francis, Angelus, 3.XII.23.

² Benedict XVI, Angelus, 30.XI.08.

³ Cf. Leroy A. Huizenga, *Loosing the Lion*, p. 277-8.

⁴ Benedict XVI, Angelus, 27.XI.05.

fullness of life. You and I are charged to bring a message of hope to a world that desperately needs that gift.

Think about the horrible fighting in the Holy Land where Israel wants security and the Palestinians a place to call home. War rages in Ukraine where an innocent people longs to see the end of aggression. We remember Syria, as well, where the common folk live in despair and constant need. We also want to bring hope to our neighbors in Haiti where the hunger for stability and a plan for the future searches for resolution.

There are many more places and peoples who desire to experience that hope. Even in our land of promise, we struggle to recognize the dignity of every person and the mission to fill up the legitimate needs of all. We long for a society where people respect and listen to one another. May this long-range planning for the Holy Year inspire our efforts.

We symbolically close a door this afternoon to anticipate its opening and the graces that will be offered to us.

It might be good to recall the words pronounced by St. Paul VI at Midnight Mass in 1974: "The celebration of the Jubilee, with its simple but profound spiritual discipline and with the symbolic opening of its doors of mercy and pardon, wants to communicate the step of the interior metamorphosis, the courageous step of the moral truth, the evangelical first step of the prodigal son, who returns to the father's house, that step that the Father awaits and interiorly inspires and makes joyful; behold the step of the conversion of the heart: 'I will get up and go [to my Father]'"⁵

The four chaplains on the USAT *Dorchester* made their dramatic decision to give their lives for others, because they were committed to serve. They valued the lives of those entrusted to their spiritual care. They were, in the watchword of this season, vigilant and prepared.

⁵ St. Paul VI, Homily for the Midnight Mass of Christmas 1974.